

# NORTHERN *delights*

From walking with reindeer to fishing for king crab to sledding with huskies or chasing the aurora borealis, there are a number of adventures to experience and natural wonders to behold in Norway.

BY TIFFANY ESLICK

**A** statue of the great explorer Roald Amundsen stands in the centre of Tromsø – Norway’s northernmost city. This intrepid man was an inspiration to me as a child. I remember poring over the pages of history books, fascinated by his journeys to both the North and South Poles.

I also remember that Tromsø was said to be the last place that my travel hero was seen. Throughout history, this North Sea boomtown, which is located 350 kilometres from the Arctic Circle, has served as a starting point for several notable expeditions. It’s from there that Amundsen took off on an ill-fated rescue mission in 1928; his plane crashed and he never returned.

Most modern-day adventurers flock to Tromsø from May to July to experience the midnight sun or from September to March in search of the *aurora borealis*, or Northern lights. Even though the city lies so far north (69°40’58”N to be exact), it has a surprisingly mild climate because of its coastal location.

Northern Norway’s expansive, seemingly untouched wilderness is an outdoor-junkie’s dream. And with opportunities such as whale watching, walking with reindeer or seeing the world’s famous celestial green lights, Tromsø, as the region’s capital, is, as it has always been, the best place for an action-packed winter holiday to begin.

I recently spent four days there, before moving west to Kirkenes – a smaller, much colder spot. What follows summarises my discoveries in both regions. I hope that you’re left as in awe of Norway as I was, and that you too will soon be exploring the north like Amundsen. →

LEFT: The dancing aurora borealis over Tromsø port.



IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES, KIRKENES SNOWHOTEL, SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, TIFFANY ESLUCK, TROMSØ ARCTIC REINDEER & VISITNORWAY.COM



### ROAM WITH REINDEER

The Sami people of Arctic Europe have inhabited parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia for thousands of years. Traditionally, this indigenous tribe has pursued a variety of livelihoods, including fishing or sheep herding, but, they are perhaps best known for being semi-nomadic reindeer herders.

Today, a small percentage of them still depend on this vocation as it provides them with meat, fur and transportation. And in fact, for a number of reasons, reindeer husbandry is legally reserved for them alone in many Nordic regions. While most of the herders may use modern machinery such as quad bikes, snow mobiles, boats or even helicopters to move their livestock, their customs and approach to a life that is in tune with and respectful of nature, remain.

Just outside Tromsø, I met with Johan-Isak – a Sami in his mid-thirties who is following in the footsteps of generations before him. During the winter months he used to let hundreds of his reindeer roam free, but over the past four years he has moved an increasing number of them into a fenced pasture. Predators such as lynx and wolverines are a real threat in the wild.

Johan-Isak offers a variety of experiences to visitors who come to his farm. One can help him feed handfuls of soft, spongy lichen to the herd, try reindeer sledding (snowfall permitting) and escape the cold inside a *lavvu* (Sami tent) while he explains the meaning and details behind his people's culture and dress, over a bowl of delicious *bidos* (a stewy soup).

I visited Johan-Isak's herd at night. As I stood with him in a field under a star-studded sky, surrounded by 100 or more curious and gentle reindeer, I didn't think the experience could get more magical. But then it did, when he suddenly started to *joik*.

"Joiking is one of the oldest song forms in Europe," he explained after performing a stirring and joyful ode. "Each one is like a feeling. You could have one for the reindeer, or the mountains, or even for yourself, that describes what sort of person you are. This land means a lot to me, so mine was all about that."

[tromsøarcticreindeer.com](http://tromsøarcticreindeer.com)

### CHASE THE LIGHTS

For hundreds of years, cultures have passed down legends and myths about the aurora borealis. Some believed the lights to be omens of impending war, disasters or natural plagues. The Vikings christened them the Northern Lights and often referred to them as reflections from dead maidens. The Sami people called them *guovssahas*, or 'the lights you can hear'. And today, some still insist that the aurora makes a crackling noise, often synchronised with their movement.

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scrumptious salted and dried lamb rack.

Gunnar has chased the lights for years. I could tell by the way his eyes lit up each time he saw the quivering green aurora swirling across the sky that for him this spectacle couldn't possibly ever grow old.

Trine Risvika's grandmother used to tell her to call on the lights by waving a handkerchief at them or by whistling towards the sky. When she and I stood on a quiet beach flanking her family's centuries-old farm, there was no need to do that. On that particular night, Lady Aurora was out in full force. →

OPPOSITE PAGE: As wild as they may be, reindeer are also curious animals; Tromsø skyline – with the Arctic Cathedral shining bright; an Alaskan husky; Sami tents called lavvus provide shelter from the cold.

THIS PAGE: Johan-Isak and his son wear traditional Sami clothing; guests can feed reindeer with Tromsø Arctic Reindeer Experience.



Science says that the lights are caused by collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the Earth's atmosphere and are then drawn towards its magnetic poles. And it's the type of gas particles that are colliding that causes the aurora to be a certain colour. A pale yellowish-green is most common, but it can also be much brighter as well as appear in shades of red, violet or blue.

There are more than a dozen tour operators in Tromsø which could have taken me to witness the world's most phenomenal light show. However, I was fortunate to meet two of the most experienced guides in the business: Gunnar Hildonen ([guide-gunnar.no](http://guide-gunnar.no)) and Trine Risvika ([tromsø-friluftsentner.no](http://tromsø-friluftsentner.no)).

Gunnar was born and raised in the South of Norway, but it's the "Finnish and Sami blood in his veins", as he says, that keeps him in the Arctic areas up north.

On my first tour with him, he set up a bonfire just outside his wooden red and white house. Along with travellers from Singapore, Hong Kong and the UK, I sipped warm blackcurrant juice while waiting for the lights. One needs three things for a successful aurora sighting: a clear sky, to be standing in a dark place and, most importantly, patience.

On our second trip, Gunnar drove an intimate group of us farther afield, before we carried our tripods and cameras into the middle of the bush. There, he prepared a feast of homemade soup, bread and even a



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### WATCH WHALES

Each winter, the entire population of spring-spawning herring (small silver fish that spend their summer feeding in the Barents Sea) migrate to the coast of Northern Norway to find shelter in the region's fjords. Huge pods of orcas and humpback whales follow suit.

Once in Nordic waters, the herring hide in the deepest troughs while the orcas dive down to find them and work on pushing them towards the surface. They herd the fish into a ball, and even use scare tactics by flashing their big white bellies. When the ball is tight enough, the orcas will start to feed. Some of the team will maintain the herding while others slap at the herring with their tails, trying to stun the fish – which are then obviously easier to consume.

At the same time, giant humpback whales eat too. The coexistence of this species and the orcas in this type of situation is distinct from behaviours seen in other locations around the world. Elsewhere, orcas often prey on larger whales.

Of course gulls and eagles don't miss the show either. They swoop down and grab the shimmering fish before swallowing them whole.

Watching feeding frenzies with the orcas, whales and seabirds off the breathtakingly beautiful coast of Kvaløyvågen is an experience I will never forget. I travelled with Trine's company (she and her partner offer a number of tours, see [tromsø-friluftsentner.no](http://tromsø-friluftsentner.no)), seated aboard an open-air RIB boat. We were able to cut through the steel-blue sea at speed while seeking out the action. Once we found it, we approached the whales cautiously so as not to harm or disrupt the process. Most of the time, only the shrill seabirds or the sounds of whales spurring air or sloshing around in the water would break the prevailing silence.

### KIRKENES

This tiny town, which lies on the opposite side of Northern Norway to Tromsø is situated as far east as Egypt's Cairo, farther east than most of Finland, and a short drive from the Russian border.

Norway's famous coastal steamer, the *Hurtigruten*, stops off here before moving onward with its journey, allowing just enough time for travellers to experience the best of Kirkenes' outdoor activities – of which there are many on offer.

It was with tour company Pasvikturist AS ([pasvikturist.no](http://pasvikturist.no)) that I first explored this town and its exquisite surrounding areas, such as the Pasvik valley with its frozen lakes and snow-kissed landscapes.



### FLY WITH ETIHAD

Etihad Airways offers direct flights to a number of European hubs where you can connect to a host of flights from Equity Partners and codeshare partners for onward travel to Oslo and Tromsø. For more information, please visit [etihad.com](http://etihad.com)



**THIS SPREAD:** Orcas and humpback whales can be spotted in Norway's fjords; husky sledding at the Kirkenes Snowhotel; king crabs can reach mammoth sizes; inside one of the cabins at the Snowhotel.

## WHERE TO STAY

### HOTEL THON POLAR TROMSØ

This centrally located hotel is within walking distance of all Tromsø's major sights, such as its magnificent library, museums, historic cathedrals, the Polaria aquarium and more. Its recently renovated rooms have Scandi-slick fit-outs with striking canvas prints of polar bears mounted on the walls. A delicious breakfast buffet is included in your stay. Don't miss the chance to try local Norwegian delicacies such as *brunost* – a brown cheese! [thonhotels.com](http://thonhotels.com)

### KIRKENES SNOWHOTEL

Each winter, The Snowhotel is rebuilt from scratch and every room is individually modelled and decorated with illuminated snow and ice sculptures. No matter the temperature outside, the Snowhotel maintains a stable temperature of -4 Celsius. You won't freeze as suitable clothing and thermal sleeping bags are provided. For those who aren't so keen on sleeping in the cold, there are also cabins on the property. The designs of these were inspired by traditional Sami hunting and fishing huts called *gamme*, but they also have a decidedly modern twist. Big enough for two, they're cute and cosy (thanks to underfloor heating) and have minimalist-chic bathrooms with aurora-wallpaper-covered walls.

At the onsite restaurant that's decked out with a chalet-chic theme, chefs prepare delicious three-course dinners with dishes such as king crab soup, reindeer osso bucco with red wine gravy and cloudberry panna cotta with licorice snow. [kirkenessnowhotel.com](http://kirkenessnowhotel.com)

### HANG OUT WITH HUSKIES

Shooting across the wilderness in Kirkenes in a sled pulled by a team of Alaskan huskies is great fun, albeit a bumpy ride. I tried this activity offered by the Snowhotel on a snowy afternoon.

The dogs may have been a somewhat motley bunch, but together were a hugely powerful crew. Alaskan huskies are not purebred – their features show

traces from greyhound, border collie, German shepherd and golden retriever, to name a few. Some have short hair, others are fluffy. They could be white, grey or black or a mixture of all three. However, they all tend to have curious, beautifully coloured eyes. These top-level athletes of the working-dog world, are known for their endurance, intelligence and speed.

Dog sledding has always been considered an efficient form of transport in the north. The Snowhotel takes its offering further with its "dog-taxi" transfer service that collects its guests from Kirkenes airport.

Back in Tromsø, there's a range of husky-related activities available at the Villmarkscenter ([villmarkscenter.no](http://villmarkscenter.no)), as well including everything from two- and five-day expeditions that take visitors riding in the mountains and camping outdoors overnight, to allowing intrepid travellers a go at driving the sleds themselves.

And in summer, or early winter when there is no snow, guests can traverse the picturesque tundra with around 15 excitable puppies in tow.

### GO FISHING

King crabs are considered to be an invasive species in the Barents Sea. And as their population increases, fishing for them (with guides who have permits) remains legitimate. The main season runs from October to January, when the crabs' shells contain the most meat.

The brown-burgundy coloured creatures turn red when they are boiled. They can also easily reach a leg span of 2m and weigh anything up to 15kg. When I went fishing with Ronny Østrem from the Kirkenes Snowhotel, I was pleased to see that the crabs in our bounty were smaller than that. Once we hauled the nets full of crabs from the icy fjord waters (in the heart of winter it's necessary to saw through the frozen ice to find them), Ronny placed them upside down in the boat. One escape artist managed to flip himself over, venturing a tad too close for my comfort, making me squirm, and Ronny laugh.

In less than an hour of our catching the crabs, they were steamed and served with lemon, mayo and wedges of bread with lashings of butter. It was a simple meal, but by far, my most memorable, up north. ♦

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more ideas on what to see and do in Northern Norway please visit: [northernorway.com](http://northernorway.com); [visitTromsø.no](http://visitTromsø.no); [visitnorway.com](http://visitnorway.com)